THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 77

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By

W. H. GARDNER

November, 1930

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SOME THOUGHTS ON 'THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE'

'Art is logic, Nature incoherency.'
—HARDING in *Sister Teresa* (George Moore).

I

WHEN I first read Thomas Hardy's novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, I was profoundly moved. In its depth and purity the pity evoked was beyond anything I had ever experienced before, and in its idealistic quality was to be paralleled only in two of Hardy's other novels, in *King Lear*, in *Othello*, and perhaps also in Goethe's *Iphigenie*. Michael Henchard, the Mayor, seemed to me a colossal figure—a tragic protagonist who, for sheer reality at least, was worthy to rank with Shakespeare's greatest characters. When I came to read the critics I found that more than one shared my admiration for Henchard—declaring him to be Hardy's greatest male character. R. L. Stevenson, in a congratulatory letter to the author, pronounced the mayor 'a great fellow'. And my own subsequent readings of the novel have convinced me not only on this point of characterization, but in my feeling that there are qualities in this novel which will yield profitable results to a more searching criticism than has hitherto been brought to bear upon it.

I have begun this essay on a personal note because the emotional appeal of a work of art is necessarily a personal matter before, and sometimes even after, the universal canons of criticism and taste have been applied. This personal appeal is, as it were, the first dry test in the analytical process; although paradoxically a certain wetness about the eyes of the literary analyst gives him a greater zest for the more thorough examination which follows. Indeed, to determine the legitimate emotional appeal of a work of art is perhaps the chief aim of all judicious criticism; for the purely intellectual content is significant only in so far as it is contributory to the dominant emotional theme. In this respect, the brilliant studies of Lionel Johnson, Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie, and Mr. H. C. Duffin have already practically assured for Hardy a very high place among the world's novelists. But still it cannot be denied that there are dissentients, many of whom have uttered vigorous and plausible animadversions which call for some consideration.

The Mayor of Casterbridge, in particular, has been the object of at least one serious attack in print. And Hardy himself seems to have

felt some uneasiness about this novel. In *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* we find the following jotting made on January 22nd, 1886:[1]

> The Mayor of Casterbridge begins to-day in the Graphic newspaper and Harper's Weekly.—I fear it will not be so good as I meant, *but after all, it is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter*. . . .

I would ask my reader to bear in mind the two aspects of this remark; first, the stricture; and second, the qualification of that stricture.

A few pages farther on we find this:

> The Mayor of Casterbridge . . . was a story which Hardy fancied he had damaged more recklessly as an artistic whole, in the interest of the newspaper in which it appeared serially, than perhaps any other of his novels, his aiming to get an incident into almost every week's part causing him in his own judgement to add events to the narrative somewhat too freely. However, as at this time he called his novel-writing 'mere journeywork' he cared little about it as art, though it must be said in favour of the plot, *as he admitted later*, that it was quite coherent and organic, in spite of its complication. And others thought better of it than he did himself. . . .

Then follows R. L. Stevenson's letter of congratulation.

It is significant to notice in these two passages that although the self-depreciation is real, it is in each case followed by a qualification which is equally explicit. And the admission that he regarded his novel-writing as 'mere journeywork' is not to be taken too seriously by the critic. Even if we concede that Hardy was primarily a poet, and that he actually wrote his novels with the nonchalance which Shakespeare seems to have shown in and about many of his plays, it cannot be denied that this 'journeywork' of Hardy's compels a keener scrutiny than the more divinely inspired efforts of most other latter-day novelists. On the other hand it is self-evident that when a novelist confesses himself 'willing, and indeed anxious, to give up any points which may be desirable in a story when read as a whole, for the sake of others which shall please those who read it in numbers'—there is a serious risk that the artistic balance of the work will be impaired. That is a conclusion at which at least one critic has arrived with respect to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But unfortunately this critic's [2] passion for denunciation would seem to have carried him a little too far. Whatever truth there may be in his strictures, I believe it will be patent to many that a still greater truth has been left unsaid. It is with the desire to supply this de-

[1] *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*, by Florence Emily Hardy (Macmillan, 1928).

[2] J. W. Beach. *See* p. 7 of this essay.

ficiency that I have undertaken the following examination. I attempt no final pronouncement; but I at least hope to show that the necessity of serial publication was, perhaps, not so destructive of this novel 'as an artistic whole' as Hardy sometimes feared, or as some others have too blatantly contended.

. . .

Mr. Arnold Bennett, acute critic no less than creative artist, has given us in his book *The Author's Craft* three fundamental rules of design for the novel which seem to me incontrovertible, and which certainly form an excellent basis for the critical examination of any work of fiction. The first rule states that in the novel the interest must be centralized; the second states that the interest must be maintained; the third states that the plot must be kept throughout in the same convention. Elementary rules?—admittedly so; but (as Mr. Bennett has pointed out) capable of revealing serious flaws in the work of some of the most powerful writers, including Meredith, Tolstoy, and Dostoievsky. Let us apply these tests to Hardy's novel.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the interest is effectively centralized. Michael Henchard is the chief character; the concentration on him is uninterrupted, and every other interest in the book is entirely subservient to our prime interest in him. There are eight other considerable characters, two of which, Farfrae and Henchard's step-daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, are in every sense finished portraits, while two more, Mrs. Henchard (Susan) and Lucetta Templeman, are distinctly 'major' in their relation to the plot; but never for a moment is any one of these characters thrust forward impertinently or allowed to assume an importance purely on his own account. In their dealings with Henchard they are the human instruments of Fate; they are indeed (to change the figure) as beams of light projected upon a sombre landscape, in the midst of which the gaunt form of the protagonist stands out with Rembrandtesque vividness. This effect of chiaroscuro and subordination has been achieved with remarkable subtlety. The handling of Farfrae is particularly fine—a masterpiece of artistic restraint. Considered as a man, and even as a type of Scot, he is a vital and convincing character. He is, moreover, the person in the story who exerts the most profound influence upon the character and destiny of Henchard. Yet his entrances are contrived with rigid economy. He is passive, unassuming; yet he cannot be classed with Susan and Elizabeth-Jane as a mere colourless nonentity. Wherever he goes he radiates personality, and even in his absence he produces the impression of an uncanny natural force working calmly and unconsciously. He is reserved, self-centred, never deliberately aggressive; yet he could

not have wrought greater havoc on another man's life and property if he had been a tornado. It is true that to the reader he is not specially likable: to some he will seem insipid, almost a prig. But that perhaps is as it should be. Hardy would have us see him *indirectly*, through the eyes of Henchard. It is enough that we should be able to perceive and understand the more favourable impression which Farfrae makes upon the other characters.

A similar restraint is to be found in the portrayal of Elizabeth-Jane; although this character is artistically not so successful as Farfrae. Like other of Hardy's simple rustic types, she has the quality of self-effacement to an almost unnatural degree. I refer particularly to her timid retirement from the battle with Lucetta for Farfrae's love. Elizabeth's sexual emotions are anaemic; but she is by no means devoid of personality. Her affection for her mother; her faithfulness to the memory of the genial sailor, Newson; her modesty; her love of culture; her respect for her elders; her unfailing courtesy and kindliness towards inferiors; her stoic acceptance of the rubs of life—all these qualities inform her comely figure with a tender charm which amply justifies her step-father's tardy infatuation. In effect, I am inclined to believe that the reticence in her character is largely due to a purposeful reticence in the delineation. Although radically different from Farfrae, she is, like him, a contrast and a foil to Henchard. Had the novelist made the two subordinate characters on more robustious lines, more individual and arresting, our additional interest in *them* would have detracted seriously from the vigorous isolation of the protagonist.

Of Mrs. Henchard and Lucetta, the two persons of the drama who rank next in importance, it may be said that they are less vital and less intrinsically interesting than the two I have just considered. Throughout the story, Farfrae and Elizabeth exert a steady personal influence, for better or worse, on the 'unruly volcanic stuff' in Henchard's nature; whereas Susan and Lucetta are introduced rather to supply him with motives and opportunities for characteristic action. Henchard's interest in these two persons was mainly factitious; and by a legitimate dispensation of dramatic art (for Hardy's method is essentially dramatic) the claim they make upon the attention of the reader is correspondingly modified. Of Mrs. Henchard, as a character, perhaps the only thing that can be said is that she is adequate. Lucetta is drawn with a freer hand. She is a real woman, from her weakness for letter-writing and posing to the sincerity and anxiety of her love for Farfrae. Her colouring is, perhaps, a little hectic; but the blemishes in her make-up are never sufficient to impair the general effect. These two complete

the number of major characters—people whose relations with Henchard are steadily maintained. The remaining four of those whom I have termed 'considerable' are the furmity-woman, Jopp, Newson, and Abel Whittle. They are all clearly sketched with that exquisite virtuosity which none but the master of fiction can lavish upon his minor characters. Whenever they are on the stage they claim our respect as creatures of flesh and blood; but their especial quality is the fitness with which they play their part in the evolution of the central tragic idea.

Arnold Bennett's second rule of design for the novel states that the interest must be maintained: 'It may increase, but it must never diminish.' To maintain this interest in the less exacting type of reader is a task which the poorest writer of ephemeral fiction can usually perform with remarkable ease. But the novelist of genius, manipulating his greater mass of material, probing more deeply into the motives of thought and action, and aiming at a more truthful presentation of life in all its variety and complexity—a Tolstoy, a Dostoievsky, a Dickens, or a Meredith—is frequently seduced by the very richness of his invention, so that his work loses something of its dramatic quality—that progressive intensity and steady concentration on a clearly defined theme without which the most powerful cumulative effect is impossible. Then again, as Mr. E. M. Forster[1] has pointed out, the interest in a novel frequently lags towards the end for the simple reason that the author, through sheer exhaustion, has himself lost much of his initial enthusiasm for his characters, and is therefore obliged to round off their history with a riot of meretricious juggling, in the midst of which the artistic illusion perishes. Neither of these faults is to be found in the best novels of Hardy. On the other hand, it has been urged with considerable plausibility that in the novel under examination the serial writer's desire to hold the attention of the undiscerning magazine readers of 1886 has led him into the aesthetic crime of sacrificing spiritual issues to a purely physical sensationalism; that a reader who has been educated up to the standard of, say, a Henry James novel is unable to believe in the reality of Hardy's creatures beyond a certain point. This view has been vigorously expressed by an American critic, J. W. Beach, in his book entitled *The Technique of Thomas Hardy* (1922). Now the fact that Hardy made large and too generous concessions to the readers of *The Graphic* is undeniable. Even if his own confession had been wanting, the somewhat degrading truth would have been made abundantly clear by a book published in 1928—*Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel*, by

[1] *Some Aspects of the Novel* (1927).

Ellen Mary Chase. In this work the author has been at great pains to collate and compare the serial version with the later book version, and has shown how the cruder and more melodramatic passages in the former have been either entirely cut or considerably modified in the latter; how certain concessions to the prudery of the age have been withdrawn; how the characters of Elizabeth-Jane and Farfrae have been improved in subtlety and truth; in short, how the artist, no longer harassed by the magazine readers, took over and completed the work which they had unconsciously interrupted.[1] Economic considerations led Hardy to declare that for a time at least he wished to be accounted 'a good hand at a serial'—a saying which may perhaps be paralleled by the *implicit* confession of Shakespeare that he (the 'self-honoured, self-secure') earnestly wished to be considered 'a good hand' at popular drama, and was therefore not averse to popping heroine after heroine into trunk-hose or piling corpse upon corpse in the fifth act of a tragedy as a concession to the interests of his company. It is no doubt a sad thing to see Genius stooping too low to conquer; on the other hand it may be held that a certain measure of popular success does serve—is, perhaps, necessary—to educe a man's greatest powers. By the act of condescension some divine qualities may be lost—certainly not all. And to return to our question of 'interest', few critics, I believe, would go so far as to assert that the complication of the plot in our novel was due to either fatigue or a lack of the higher imagination. To quote once more Hardy's own words, 'it is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter'; and in this latter respect the novel is irreproachable. The plot, moreover, in spite of its complication, remains 'quite coherent and organic'. And Hardy, so far from showing signs of a waning interest in his characters, seems deliberately to withhold

[1] This book is published by the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The following are some of Hardy's alterations:

(1) In the serial version, Henchard's friendship with Lucetta began as follows: When landing from the packet steamer in Jersey he slipped, struck his head, and fell unconscious into the sea. Lucetta dived in and saved him—in gratitude for which action he promised to marry her. In the book version the events are more natural: Henchard falls ill at his hotel; Lucetta nurses him; intimate relations ensue and the woman is compromised.

(2) The one episode in the novel which, in spite of its adroit handling, I have always felt to be extraneous—that in which Henchard rescues Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane from the bull—is actually *three times longer in the serial version.*

(3) In the serial, Lucetta's preparations to meet Henchard secretly in the Ring are described with an excess of histrionic detail. In the novel, however, the passage is terse and effective. Again, in the serial, Farfrae melodramatically breaks in upon the meeting between his wife and her former lover, and even walks back to town with them without recognizing the veiled woman as his wife. This intrusion by Farfrae was omitted in the book version.

his tremendous passion till the end, when, in the last testament of Michael Henchard (as in the last paragraph of *Tess*), it breaks out in bitter cynicism and irony. J. W. Beach finds in this novel everything 'so disposed that the interest shall never lag'. I will go a step farther and say that the interest actually increases: though I shall make some attempt hereafter to refute this critic's accusation of superficiality and sensationalism.

The third and last important rule of design states that the plot should be kept throughout in the same convention. 'A convention is essential; and the duty of the novelist is to be true within his chosen convention, and no farther.' Hardy's position with regard to this rule has been so admirably stated by Mr. Bennett that I must quote him again: 'Thomas Hardy has been arraigned for the conventionalism of his plots. And yet Hardy happens to be one of those rare novelists who have evolved a new convention to suit their idiosyncrasy. Hardy's idiosyncrasy is a deep conviction of the whimsicality of the divine power. . .' An interesting passage to compare with these opinions is the following from *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (a note-book jotting, dated June 3, 1882):

> As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another; so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature; yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.

All this is undoubtedly true; and if it is equally true that idiosyncrasy is an integral part of genius, and that a novelist without a certain idiosyncrasy is a novelist without originality, then Hardy has nothing to lose by the admission. Hence, the Wherefore being duly settled, he stands or falls by our examination of the How. And I think it will be found that as Sophocles in *Oedipus*, Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, Swift in *Gulliver*, and Barrie in *Dear Brutus* are all *true* within their chosen conventions, so Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is consistently true within the tragic and fatalistic convention which gives a philosophic unity to all his novels of Character and Environment.

Having briefly considered the fundamental structure, we may proceed now to the 'vital tissue' or what may be termed the textural qualities of the novel. Of these qualities the pervasive beauty of the rural setting is one of the most attractive. Critics have already spoken of the Chorus of Nature in Hardy's cosmic drama; and to me this signifies the tragic poet's conception of the external world, in all its primeval grandeur, as intimately and mysteriously related

to a cognate growth called elemental humanity. That all life is rooted in the soil, and that the roots of mankind are in some occult way intertwined with those of 'mute insensate things' appears to be the idea underlying Hardy's symbolism.[1] This symbolism is nowhere specifically affirmed, but the exquisite example in *The Woodlanders* is surely significant. And herein Hardy shows some affinity to Wordsworth. He lacks Wordsworth's faith and optimism, but on the other hand he is far removed from the uncompromising pessimism of a poet like Alfred de Vigny, to whom Nature was hateful by reason of its cold insensibility. To Hardy, Nature and Man seem to share a common fate; but to the French poet Nature seems frankly inimical:

> On me dit une mère et je suis une tombe.[2]

The conclusion that we draw from the Wessex drama is that Nature is certainly womb no less than tomb, nurse no less than destroyer. And the second line of that noble couplet in which de Vigny expresses his defiance of Nature:

> Plus que tout votre règne et que ses splendeurs vaines
> *J'aime la majesté des souffrances humaines. . . .*

might well have been the utterance of Egdon Heath or the Frome valley. Hence we find that the arena chosen for the Hardian representation of the ancient and interminable struggle between the forces of Good and Evil is the natural one, where the issue may be watched by the Spirit of the Pities and the Spirit of the Years with something approaching detachment—the broad sweeps of heath, the rich tracts of meadowland, the hills, the woods, and the dusty roads along which the weary fighters trek from battle to battle. We see, moreover, that in spite of the classical austerity of his style, Hardy the novelist is, in spirit and manner, a great Romantic. Like Wordsworth's poetry, the Wessex drama is the perfect fulfilment of Blake's prophetic dictum:

> Great things are seen when men and mountains meet;
> This is not done by jostling in the street.

The influence of environment upon the characters in the novels has already inspired much interesting criticism. This influence, however, is really a subtle essence which, like the spirit of poetry itself, defies analysis. It is the artistic reflex of the powerful impression made upon the poet by the scenes and associations of his

[1] This principle is also illustrated in many of Hardy's poems; for example, 'The Convergence of the Twain', and 'In a Wood'. Again, see *Early Life*, p. 150: 'I sometimes look upon all things in inanimate Nature as pensive mutes.'

[2] 'La Maison du berger.'

own early life. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* there is nothing to match the sublime characterization of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*; but that is at least partly due to the fact that in *The Mayor* the tragic interest is more exclusively concentrated on humanity itself as embodied in a single representative protagonist. Nevertheless, our novel contains many fine examples of landscape and local features which, in the true Greek manner, act as a sensible chorus to the human drama—now offering a poignant comparison, now a harsh contrast: at one time sympathetic and almost expressing divine love; at another time inimical, perverse, ironical, and eloquent of divine callousness. It is the expression through Things of those cosmic ideas which in *The Dynasts* are more completely expressed through Spirits. The Ring at Casterbridge, an ancient Roman amphitheatre in which the forefathers of Solomon Longways and Christopher Coney had watched many a fierce gladiatorial combat, was, indeed, the fittest place for those ominous nocturnal meetings between Henchard and his two women.[1] The banks of the river skirting the north-eastern limits of the town embodied the mournful phases of Casterbridge life, whereas the south avenues embodied its cheerful moods. And as further examples of apposite setting—places pregnant with the psychic influence of past associations—consider the two bridges, which served as retreats for two distinct types of unfortunate denizens: the hissing turmoil of waters at Ten Hatches, whither Henchard retired to meditate in the moment of spiritual darkness; the decadent purlieus of Mixen Lane, which nourished and sheltered the lower instincts in those who lacked social anchorage.

We find, also, a converse principle at work—a principle which is entirely compatible with the dictum that Art is Logic. Hardy, above all other novelists I know, has the remarkable power of investing the forms of external nature with a new physiognomy in accordance with spiritual issues working themselves out in the mind of Man. In this process, moreover, the calm everyday aspect of things, so far from being lost or impaired, is actually heightened and magnified. An excellent example is to be found in the very first chapter of *The Mayor*. The disillusionment, ennui, and 'stale familiarity' of the hay-trusser and his wife, as they plod wearily along the dusty road leading to Weydon Priors, are exactly mirrored in the blackened-green vegetation of the late-summer countryside, the silence of which is broken only by 'the voice of a weak bird

[1] In *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*, occurs the note: 'An object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature' (p. 153).

singing a trite old evening song that might doubtless have been heard on the hill at that same hour, and with the self-same trills, quavers, and breves, at any sunset of that season for centuries untold.'[1] But the principle is even more fundamental; for the main spiritual issues in this novel derive directly from the clash and contrast between two disparate groups of people: on the one hand the polished, urbane Farfrae and the sophisticated, theatrical Lucetta; on the other hand the amorphous, elemental Henchard and his simple, unassuming step-daughter. Now in order to provide a suitable stage for this drama, Hardy in some measure renounced his partiality for open spaces and confined the greater part of the action within the narrow limits of a small town; but this town, while faithfully preserving the characteristics of early-Victorian Dorchester,[2] is specifically represented as being a place of work and domiciliation hardly different from the surrounding country—the complement, and not the urban opposite, of the rural life. Tenderly poetical is the passage in which this homogeneity of atmosphere is most vividly described:

> Bees and butterflies in the cornfields at the top of the town, who desired to get to the meads at the bottom, took no circuitous course but flew straight down High Street without any apparent consciousness that they were traversing strange latitudes. And in Autumn airy spheres of thistledown floated into the same street, lodged upon the shop fronts, blew into drains; and innumerable tawny and yellow leaves skimmed along the pavement and stole through people's doorways, with a hesitating scratch on the floor like the skirts of timid visitors.[3]

In this way the novelist has prepared a *décor* which serves at once as a foil and a natural setting to each group of characters; furthermore, by laying his scene in such a town, he is able to utilize the greater rapidity and concentration of the urban life without sacrificing the spaciousness and imaginative possibilities of the countryside. And when the battle has been waged, and the 'clubbable' Farfrae has finally ousted Henchard from the town society for which he was temperamentally unfitted, it is natural that the latter should retire once more to the unequivocal fields and hedges of the rough open-air life which, from the cradle, had moulded his stubborn character.

But in this work it is not only the stable and permanent features of external nature which serve as a choral commentary on the progress of the drama. The march of seasons; the numerous shifting

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 3.
[2] 'Dorchester is touched in with the hand of a master' (R. L. Stevenson).
[3] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 68.

phases of earth and sky—sunlight, moonlight, starlight; the transitory elements—dew, fog, wind, rain, and cloud—these also are endowed with an active personality, and sometimes play their part in the great game with an almost human zest. The rain that spoilt Henchard's celebrations was something more than ordinary kill-joy rain. As it streams off the useless tea-tables and drips embrowned from the hams at the tops of the greasy poles, it seems to possess the devastating qualities of vitriol. It is literally a 'smiting of earth by heaven', and its malign aspect is entirely due to our inordinate sympathy with the mayor in his acute discomfiture; indeed, we are not conscious of the intense actuality of this man's character until the occurrence of that minor calamity. And later on we are affected in the same way by that wind which comes as vaunt-courier to another disastrous downpour—the wind that 'rubbed people's faces like a damp flannel'[1] just before the uncertain harvest. Characteristic, too, is that simile of the damp flannel, conveying as it does, in a few words, the truth of a natural phenomenon and the insolence of a mocking emissary of Fate.

In these examples the forces of nature are perverse, as if suborned by the powers of darkness—a fact which is quite in keeping with the tragic convention. But this mood is not unrelieved. When Lucetta starts out to meet Henchard at the Ring, hoping to persuade him to return to her the letters with which he had threatened to destroy her happiness, 'the sun was resting on the hill like a drop of blood on an eyelid.'[2] Mr. H. C. Duffin has pronounced this simile unlovely.[3] It may be; but it reveals what may be termed a physico-pathetic approximation of a natural phase to the mood of the characters, which is extremely effective. The emotions of the reader are keyed up to the right pitch in anticipation of an approaching crisis.

The Chorus of Nature finds its human complement in the rustic characters who haunt the second-rate inn, 'The Three Mariners'. Solomon Longways, Christopher Coney, Buzzford, and Mrs. Cuxom are cast in the same mould as the rustics in the other great novels, and they are second to none. They are vehicles of the same gentle humour and lambent satire. Their naive comments on the doings of the chief characters are accompanied by the same comic head-shaking, pot-swilling, and staring at a fixed point in space. They make their presence felt, but never obtrusively; tempting as the material must have been, the novelist avoids over-elaboration.

[1] ibid., p. 228. Equally fine is the simile which characterizes perfectly the deceptive sunlight. Indeed, the whole paragraph is a masterpiece of description.

[2] ibid., p. 301.

[3] *A Study of the Wessex Novels* (1919).

They are exhilarating company, for humble as they are, they allow themselves a chartered liberty of thought and speech; and yet they pursue the noiseless tenor of their way in a state of resigned contentment such as no mere worldly prosperity could ever bestow. Like their prototypes in George Eliot, they frequently give utterance to sentiments in which humour and pathos are quietly blended. For instance, after the burial of Mrs. Henchard, Christopher Coney, having dug up the four pennies placed on the dead woman's eyes, has ruthlessly converted them into small beer at 'The Three Mariners'. Solomon Longways tells the others, who at once deprecate the action as 'cannibal'. But Solomon can see no 'treason' in it. 'Money is scarce', he says, 'and throats get dry. Why should death rob life of fourpence?' Then Mrs. Cuxom adds her plaintive monody: 'Well, poor soul; she's helpless to hinder that or anything now. And all her shining keys will be took from her, and her cupboards opened; and little things a' didn't wish seen anybody will see; and her wishes and ways will all be as nothing.'[1] This surely is no whit inferior to Mrs. Quickly on the death of Falstaff.

I have heard one or two confirmed townsmen remark that these countrymen of Hardy's are not true to nature. Most readers will find that they are, in the aesthetic sense, absolutely right. They ring true because the poet (the word slips out)—the poet knows how to convey with spontaneous ease the imaginative impression which is the result of many years of direct intercourse. By applying the artistic principle of selection and condensation, Hardy has given us the very genius of rustic idiosyncrasy. Humour of the highest order, like beauty, is truth; and Hardy's humour is of this kind—the humour which proceeds from understanding and sympathy. Again and again he has woven into the sombre texture of his tragedy exquisite, droll episodes beside which the comic relief in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* appears unconscionably crude.

A recapitulation of the merits of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* would be incomplete without some mention of Hardy's style, which by the time this book was written had undoubtedly reached its full maturity. In the first place it is entirely free from the strained self-consciousness that marred much of the work of Dickens and Meredith.[2] Hardy's best manner (and his lapses are few) has all the directness, vigour, and austerity of his matter. It is sober and re-

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 144.

[2] See *The Early Life*, p. 138: 'The whole secret of a living style, and the difference between it and a dead style, lies in not having too much style—being, in fact, a little careless, or rather seeming to be, here and there. It brings wonderful life into the writing.' (Note-book.)

strained in colouring; yet it is sufficiently flexible for his purpose, and conveys with equal truth the poignant emotion of a tragic conflict and the inane chatter of village idiots. Both Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie and Mr. Duffin have remarked on the absence of poetical supersense—that 'dynamic' quality in the words, that aura of subtle suggestion to be found in the greatest prose styles. The criticism is a just one, and points to a deficiency which is to be noticed even in Hardy's poetry, authentic poetry as it is. But in his prose I should hesitate to call it a defect. His matter being what it was, I for one would never wish his style to have been a whit more De Quinceyan, Stevensonian, or Lambesque. No one can deny that he is a master of logical exposition, sustained rhythm, a judicious use of balance, and an unusual richness of figurative illustration. Whatever his style does not convey, it certainly does convey the naked beauty of his concept. Remembering the fable of the dog and the bone, one looks with suspicion on the reflection —that extraneous beauty which Hardy, had he been less sincere, might conceivably have striven to attain. A fair woman, said the magnificent Francis Thompson, looks her best in plain attire. And as this poet to his 'not impossible She', so many lovers of Hardy must have been moved to exclaim:

I cannot see your body for your soul.

II

As I have already suggested, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* will probably stand for all time as a great novel chiefly on account of one tremendous character—the protagonist, Michael Henchard. But before this claim can be substantiated, it may be necessary to examine with care certain strictures which in recent years have been directed against Hardy's method. Most critics are agreed about one point: that the plots of the major novels reveal a unique virtuosity, and what has been called an architectural symmetry of design. But whereas one party sees in this manipulation of characters and events a merely mechanical skill which is unworthy of great art and is barely justified by the resultant impression, the other more favourable party would go to any extreme to defend the method solely on account of that resultant impression, which to them is exquisite, and would define the novelist's invention not as arbitrary puppet-dangling, but as an enviable richness in 'apposite illustrative incident'—the power of being able to dramatize an intellectual discovery with superb effect. Impartial criticism must, at the outset, concede some truth to the former opinion. Half way

through *Far from the Madding Crowd* George Moore closed the book in disgust—a disgust due to what he considered a violation of the dictum *Ars est celare artem.*[1] Recently George Moore pronounced *ore rotundo* some wild judgements on Hardy and Conrad. Nevertheless, the calmer reflections to be found in his writings are always significant. That is why I have made his own dictum 'Art is logic' the touchstone whereby I hope to show that many of the strictures directed against Hardy have been carried too far, and have even revealed a lack of sensibility in the critic.

One critic has said that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* reads like a film scenario. He concedes, I think, a good scenario. Confessedly and ruthlessly judging Hardy by the standards of Henry James, he complains of an unpardonable want of 'psychology'; he is disgusted, too, by what he calls the author's inferior substitute for the Jamesian psychology—a 'piling up of stage tricks, a concatenation of circumstances violent and surprising, all obvious and striking arrangements for providing excitement.' Thus spake J. W. Beach in 1922;[2] and in 1930 we are quite familiar with the criticism which makes Henry James the criterion of all good fiction. To the student of literature, however, whose taste is not enslaved by the fashion of the hour, it is always unpleasant to see the peculiar excellence of one artist dragged into court in order to confute the entirely different excellence of another. It is a practice that is only too prevalent in criticism of the other arts—music, painting, and poetry. Passionate admirers of Stravinsky, Picasso, or T. S. Eliot justify their preference for the new prophets by heaping abuse upon the old. Hating anything in the nature of a dynasty, they scornfully denounce all earlier Schools as being mere ephemeral phases, insignificant steps in the evolution of their own particular rule—a complacency which is perhaps pardonable in the creative artist, but which is intolerable in the ordinary spectator and critic. And to return to our subject, this charge of melodramatic superficiality levelled against Hardy is obviously based upon the false assumption that Cerebral Comedy should dictate the requirements of Sophoclean Tragedy. And even if we admit that there may be some resemblance between the plot of *The Mayor* and a film scenario, does this amount to any more than saying that the plot is radically different from a Henry James plot, which does not resemble a scenario? Yes, you may reply; it amounts to saying that whereas in Henry James the connexion between character and thought and action is everywhere expounded with meticulous psychological precision, in Hardy (as in a scenario) this connexion is either

[1] *The Confessions of a Young Man.* [2] *The Technique of Thomas Hardy.*

ignored altogether or else treated in a perfunctory manner, so that action, being thus severed from its legitimate source in the brain, becomes in the hands of a quack a series of arbitrary dispensations directed towards an ignoble end, 'a concatenation of circumstances &c. . . . all obvious arrangements for providing excitement.' Against this I affirm that Hardy is guilty of no such gross charlatanism. *The Mayor* contains just as much psychology as an essentially dramatic exposition of character requires, and, I rejoice to say, no more. Since Hardy was not ordained to write *The Ambassadors*, we may be thankful that he was not doomed to the persuasion that the only estimable qualities in a novel are those hair-splitting subtleties and laboured intellectual obscenities which pass with many people to-day for psychology and the only satisfying form of wit. Nobody will deny that psychology is the life-blood of good fiction; but the danger lurks in plethora, in making Freudian speculation a morbid gymnastic and a wholly insufficient end in itself. Great art assumes a clear and exact delineation of some lofty concept; and in fiction the artist's method must deliberately simulate the inscrutable logic of what has been variously termed the First Cause, the Immanent Will, &c. Provided, therefore, that the creator of fictitious characters can make them speak and act in a convincing manner, and move, as by divine compulsion, towards a worthy emotional climax, the psychology is implicit, and the artistic aim is achieved. The one essential canon is that incident must everywhere be subservient to idea.[1] Shakespeare's plays are full of 'obvious and striking arrangements for providing excitement.' The lusty Elizabethans demanded it. But for some reason this master-dramatist is never quite himself in a modern film.[2] The reason may be that he gives us, besides crude melodrama, a good deal of genuine psychology. Not only psychology, but poetry, which likewise cannot be photographed. The same is true of Hardy. If *The Mayor* really does resemble a film scenario, I can only deplore the fact that so much literary genius is daily being sacrificed in the production of comparatively worthless films.

Another defect in *The Mayor* which stirs the same critic to vehement protest is the frequency of overheard conversations. It is

[1] Cf. with this Hardy's own words in *The Early Life*, Jan. 14th, 1887: 'A "sensation-novel" is possible in which the sensationalism is not casualty, but evolution; not physical but psychical. . . . The difference between the latter kind of novel and the novel of physical sensationalism—i.e., personal adventure, &c.—is this: that whereas in the physical the adventure itself is the subject of interest, the psychical results being passed over as commonplace, in the psychical the casualty or adventure is held to be of no intrinsic interest, but the effect upon the faculties is the important matter to be depicted.'

[2] In time the 'talking' film may alter this.

true that this artifice is a favourite one with Hardy, and inasmuch as the repetition is noticeable it must be considered a technical flaw. But even when this admission has been made, a careful scrutiny of the novel will reveal the fact that the flaw is not a serious one, since nowhere throughout the story does the development of plot or character depend entirely upon the facts gleaned from an overheard conversation. Usually the situation is brought about so naturally, is described with such truth and sensibility, and illustrates so effectively the underlying idea, that anything like a lengthy defence would be an impertinence. Of this kind is the pathetic colloquy overheard by Farfrae and Lucetta on the occasion of their first meeting in High Place Hall.[1] The pitiful outcry of the peasant girl who is about to lose her lover brings a tear to the eye of the emotional Lucetta; at the same time it inspires the phlegmatic Farfrae to assist the unhappy pair. The result of this episode is that a bond of attraction is formed between Lucetta and Farfrae. But it would be a mistake to suppose that subsequent weighty events are entirely due to this accidental eavesdropping. The incident is a piece of pure ornamentation, justified by its sheer beauty; and the attachment, which it precipitated, would certainly have developed into a marriage without it.

Our critic has also said that Henchard 'seems always to be so placed behind wall or haystack as to hear news that maddens him and drives him on to fatal action.' Here the facts are nearly correct but the inference is altogether false. It is true that on two occasions Hardy contrives to make Henchard overhear certain words which stick daggers into him by confirming his worst suspicions. One occasion is when he follows Lucetta and Farfrae into the moonlit cornfield, and from the interior of a wheat-stook catches a fragment of their amorous talk. The other occasion is when he overhears Farfrae making love to Elizabeth-Jane on the far side of a wall. But the important point is that this eavesdropping is not purely accidental. On both occasions Henchard is deliberately playing the spy.[2] His action is perfectly in character. Moreover, it is not, as might be supposed, entirely abject. It is the natural outcome of a train of circumstances, the culmination of a clearly defined process of thought and the expression of what is, after all, the best side of his character. Henchard is a man of many faults; but he has at least, deep down, an intense desire for a true and abiding affection. As he continues to sink in the social scale, this desire grows to a despotic passion. But since he is a man of moods and devoid of geniality and humour, he is difficult to live

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 192. [2] ibid., p. 370 (bottom).

with, and none knows it better than himself. Hence the *sollicitus timor* of his love. Lacking confidence in his power to attract and hold affection, he is an easy prey to jealous fears. He has the hypersensitiveness of a certain type of egoist, and once his suspicions are aroused, he anxiously lies in wait for conclusive evidence of desertion. People of this kind are only too common in everyday life. They anticipate the nemesis of their own failings. Literally or figuratively, they apply their ear to every keyhole; they seek the worst, and usually they find it. To return to Henchard, I affirm that in neither of these overheard conversations does he glean any sudden and unexpected information. Each time he had known quite well beforehand the exasperating course his affairs were taking. The device, therefore, is simply an effective and legitimate way of bringing his suffering to a head. It is another example of the essential condensed logic of Art as opposed to the apparent sprawling incoherency of Nature. A greater novelist might have given us a more naturalistic or indeed an entirely abstract 'psychological' exposition. Many readers, however, will continue to find Hardy's method admirable. It is dramatic, true to character, and has all the probability that fictive action need have.

A careful examination of the novel will show that in the evolution of Henchard there is at all times a strict connexion between act and consequence. The consequences, it is urged, are usually fatalistic; but so they are in the stories of Oedipus and Lear. The closer parallel, at the first glance, is that of Oedipus, about whom the casual critic might exclaim, as I have heard him exclaim about Henchard: 'How depressing! The poor wretch doesn't stand a chance!' But for the reader who has been 'convinced' by Henchard, as he is convinced by Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth, the vital question still remains to be answered: How far was Henchard master of his own fate? Certainly, we may say at once, to a far greater extent than Oedipus, who was doomed by stern gods to be a martyr for the enlightenment of the whole human race. For whereas Oedipus kills his own father and weds his own mother by oracular decree and without knowing what he is doing, Henchard, on the contrary, sells his wife, bullies Abel Whittle, estranges Farfrae, persecutes Elizabeth-Jane, dallies with Lucetta, speculates wildly, deceives Newson, and all the time is as fully aware of the tenor of his actions as were Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth of theirs. Fundamentally good, he soon feels the prick of conscience and strives to make amends; but Something, which is at once an objective and a subjective antagonism, is forever thwarting his best intentions. He

accepts this scourging as the just punishment for his own misdeeds, and at each successive stroke of the whip he clenches his teeth and murmurs, in a spirit of heroic resignation: 'My punishment is not more than I can bear.'

All this testifies to Hardy's appreciation of the truth in those words quoted from Novalis: 'Character is Fate'.[1] We see in Hardy, as we see also in Shakespeare, that the warp of calamity which is spun out of the tragic character is caught up, as it were, by the weft of a malign external Fate, and woven into that dire net from which there is no escape save by the way of death. In *The Mayor* we see this process at work on those frequent occasions when Henchard's most auspicious plans or most innocent desires are narrowly forestalled by some adverse circumstance which turns them all to dust and ashes. We see it in the disastrous rainstorms, to produce which Fate seems to have conspired at one time with Henchard's want of foresight, at another time with his ignorant credulity and superstition. We see it in his discovery that Elizabeth-Jane is not his own daughter—the discovery preceding by only a few hours the long-desired moment when she consents to call him ' father'. We see it in the way Farfrae captures Lucetta's fancy only a few minutes before Henchard makes his belated first appearance at High Place Hall. We see it again in the return of the furmity-woman, in the return of Newson. Surely (you may say), a dismal and preposterous fugue of ironic happenings, in which Henchard must appear to some readers insupportably futile and to others insupportably wretched. The truth is, however, that these facts will appeal quite differently to those readers whose emotions react fully to all the subtle contrapuntal harmonies which the poet plays upon this massive organ-like character. It is perhaps a tenable theory that the book is bound to appeal rightly and powerfully only to people of a certain pathological type—a type which is most common in the South of this island, and in which sympathy, sensibility, and casuistry predominate over practical, hard-headed acquisitiveness. That, at least, is what I have found among my own acquaintance; for the latter qualities frequently co-exist in that large class of readers who 'seek only their own ideas in a representation, and prize that which should be as higher than what is.'[2] But those who are prone to seek in a novel that interpretation of truth for which the facts were expressly evolved

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 136 (bottom): 'But most probably *luck had little to do with it. Character is Fate*, said Novalis. . . .' This statement is intensely significant in the light of later findings in this essay.

[2] Quoted by Hardy in the preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

will probably disagree with those cavillers who say that in *The Mayor* the too frequent use of coincidence and irony is a serious artistic blemish.

Mr. H. C. Duffin has called the novel 'A Study in the Irony of Fate'. The description is true up to a point; but it seems to me that to call this 'Story of a Man of Character' simply and plainly a 'Study in the Irony of Fate' is to attach a greater importance to 'irony' than to 'character'—a provision which detracts from Henchard's significance as a tragic figure, and which relegates Hardy's art to a lower plane than it deserves. I suggest that Mr. Duffin is so exclusively preoccupied with the Irony of Fate that he cannot see the 'Fate' (which is Character) for the 'Irony'—a fault of perception for which the novelist is not responsible.

In his remarks on the above quotation from Novalis, Mr. Duffin says in the first place that 'character is simply one of the circumstances in a man's environment, but it is of a special and unique nature, inasmuch as it automatically modifies all the other circumstances, affects and changes them in a manner peculiar to itself. . . . It is in this sense that "Character is Fate". . . . It alone does not determine destiny, but it profoundly modifies all the other determining factors.' So far—well. But a little later, after having recorded Henchard's rise to the mayoralty, the critic says: 'Henchard's character, reacting upon certain of his circumstances, has already[1] brought about several facts which are now part of his destiny, *and which are to ensure his fall from power*.' These facts are, of course, the sale of his wife to Newson, her subsequent return with Elizabeth-Jane, and the final appearance of Newson himself. Now the words that I have put in italics are perfectly true: the 'ironical' facts do ensure or *complete* Henchard's downfall. But if the words were intended to mean that Henchard's fall was due to what may be called the wife-selling *motif*, and to no other, then those words are grossly misleading. Mr. Duffin does not make this point clear. He does not show that Henchard's fall was due much more directly to the rivalry of Farfrae, to the crumbling of his own powers of resistance, to the gradual ripening of fatal inherent weaknesses. The tragic conflict is the struggle between Henchard and Farfrae, and the fall of the protagonist is the story of his slow defeat by a stronger man than himself—a man, moreover, whose advent was in no wise connected with the wife-selling *motif*. The main crisis in Henchard's career occurs in the scene where Farfrae rebukes his master for his rash cruelty towards Abel Whittle, whose flesh he would mortify for unpunctuality. As Moulton found so frequently in Shake-

[1] Nineteen years before, at Weydon Priors.

speare's tragedies, the few significant words that mark this crisis have the air of deliberate artifice:

'Hullo, hullo!' said Henchard, coming up behind. 'Who's sending him [Whittle] back?'

All the men looked towards Farfrae.

'I am', said Donald. 'I say this joke has been carried far enough!'[1]

The words in italics clearly foreshadow the change of allegiance which from that day onwards proceeds steadily to its bitter and inevitable end.

But it will be noticed that although Farfrae's opposition is not a direct result of that earlier crisis, the wife-selling, yet it was brought about by precisely the same weakness in Henchard's character—his passionate impulsiveness. Observe, too, the striking consistency in the immediate results. After the wife-selling he repents, swears a great oath to abstain from drink for twenty years, and sets out at once to make amends. After the rebuke from Farfrae he quickly admits his error in these words:

'Why did you speak to me before the men like that, Farfrae? You might have stopped till we were alone.'

Then his next words hint at a real and significant connexion between his earlier misdeed and his present one:

'Ah—I know why. I've told ye the secret of my life [the wife-selling]—fool that I was to do't—and you take advantage of me.'

To which Farfrae replies, with frank sincerity:

'I had forgot it.'[2]

That is the simplicity of great art. The novelist supplies the vital facts without undue comment, and so sure are his observation and judgement that the psychological truth of the situation is at once 'felt' by the reader. He will realize, too, that when Farfrae says that his opposition was not provoked by his knowledge of Henchard's guilty secret, he is speaking the truth—as far as he knows it. The whole truth is, however, that his knowledge of the earlier indiscretion would subconsciously quicken his perception of later ones.

It is along these lines that Henchard's character 'automatically modifies' that element in his environment which is Donald Farfrae. As soon as he appeared on the scene, Farfrae was a 'determining factor' in Henchard's destiny; but it was the specific character of the latter, 'profoundly modifying' that 'determining factor', which eventually converted a faithful servant into a formidable, if involuntary, rival. It cannot be too forcibly stated, in defence of Hardy's art, that it is Henchard himself, and not Fate, who ulti-

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 119. [2] ibid., p. 119.

mately makes Farfrae what he is; similarly it is in himself, no less than in his stars, that Henchard must seek the causes of his own failure. Wherefore it seems to me that to call this novel, as Mr. Duffin does, a mere 'record of disappointment', a study of ' a single mortal writhing on the toasting-fork of Fate' is to show very little more subtlety or discernment than those worthies who named their play 'the lamentable comedy of Pyramus and Thisby'. It is false to declare that Henchard is merely a pathetic figure, a gambler who is always losing; he is a man of parts, sensibility, and honour who, in his most enlightened moments, recognizes his own insidious weaknesses and is perpetually fighting them: 'Why should I be subject to these visitations of the devil when I try so hard to keep them away?'[1] It is a losing battle; but like the struggles of Macbeth and Hamlet, it reaches the sublime. In short, the fate of Henchard is tragic in the truest sense of that much-abused word. He may be sport for the President of the Immortals, but the most disastrous effects of this sport can all be traced to their prime causes in his character. The death of his own daughter, the return and duplicity of his wife, the return of the furmity-woman and Newson—all these are perfectly feasible results of the wife-selling. Henchard's bankruptcy is due not to the wet harvest but to his superstition, set in motion by a malicious desire to ruin Farfrae with all possible speed. His loss of prestige in the eyes of the townsfolk was largely due to his petulant egoistic self-depreciation—a morbid state of mind occasioned by acute jealousy: 'Go to Mr. Farfrae. He's master here now.'[2] Farfrae is able to capture the heart of Lucetta only a few minutes before Henchard's arrival simply because Henchard himself, out of pure pique and wounded vanity, is deliberately three days late. Examples could be multiplied, and in all these semi-fatalistic happenings we discern a rough poetic justice similar to that found in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

It has been said, in no complimentary way, that the old furmity-woman 'is made to reappear just at the time when she is required to complete the degradation of Henchard'.[3] This statement is true in the superficial sense that the old woman's public disclosures put an end to his career as a man of importance in Casterbridge; but it is false in the deeper sense that it leaves out of account the main tragic issue, the inner struggle between the good and bad elements in his nature. In this latter respect the word 'degradation' must be replaced by its own antonym.[4] And consider the artifice implied in the word 'made'. Was it not by a similar dispensation that

[1] See p. 27 of this essay.
[2] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 119.
[3] J. W. Beach (1922).
[4] See Macmillan, p. 242: 'No—'t is true', &c.

Laertes and Fortinbras were 'made' successively to fill the stage with their bombast and heroics just at the time when they were needed to set off or 'complete' the degradation of Hamlet?—that in *King Lear* Gloucester, actuated by the best motives, interrupts the king's sleep just at the time when sleep would have knit up the ravelled sleave of his care?—and again that Edgar, masquerading as Tom o' Bedlam, unwittingly reminds the old man of his direst wrongs just at the time when such a reminder was fatal to his mental balance? If Hardy is to be judged by accepted standards, in the name of truth let them be universal! I suspect that Hardy understood the difference between Nature and Art better than some critics do. The writer of fiction, as Sheridan observed long ago, is not obliged to give us what does happen in everyday life; he may give us, if he choose, only what might happen. In effect, he gives us just whatever he wants to happen, and most of us are prepared to accept it so long as it is true to his chosen convention, true to his progressive idea, intellectually stimulating—in a word, convincing. So far from leaving me unconvinced, or even dubious, the return of the furmity-woman seemed to me almost inevitable. I expected it, almost as when, in the reading of poetry, my ear expects a rhyme. And even if I had at first been doubtful of its artistic integrity, the stark effectiveness of the court scene, with the light it throws on the better side of Henchard's character, and the Rabelaisian humour in the altercation between the harridan and the local Dogberry, would have reconciled me to a great deal of crude construction. But after all, was this return so improbable? Hardy frequently insists on the compact nature of Wessex, and the story of such an unusual transaction as the sale of a wife was bound to become a tradition which was likely to pop up anywhere within the limits of this little world. Moreover, the time when a prominent man is suffering under a serious reverse of fortune is notoriously the time when he finds it most difficult to conceal the delinquencies of his past. Granted, then, a fair possibility that the story in question would eventually reach Casterbridge, who so likely to carry it, who so likely to disgorge it from the dock of a county court, as this old cynical peripatetic, the furmity-woman?

I have said that the reappearance of this woman seemed to me almost inevitable; and behind that statement lies an important truth about Hardy's method. I have maintained in this essay that he is unusually fertile in 'apposite illustrative incident', the only true criterion of which is the way it is made to interpret spiritual values, and to demonstrate ultimately the force of the dictum 'Character is Fate'. When the reader's conception of a

character is clear and strong, his imagination is stirred by a prophetic impulse which roughly simulates the creative impulse of the author. So powerful is this secondary impression of dynamic reality, that the reader's mind begins to grope forward vaguely and tentatively in the tracks of the creator, and by the same inductive process foreshadows a destiny. Then, as he reads on, and incident after incident is unfolded, he seems to be already half familiar with them; they coincide broadly with his preconceived notions, and he accepts them readily as authentic revelations. As Coleridge once said, the interest of the reader is maintained by expectation and not by surprise. And a modern novelist[1] has said the same in other words: 'In some of the most tedious novels ever written you can't tell what is going to happen next—and you don't care a fig what is going to happen next. It would be nearer the mark to say that the plot is good when you want to make sure what will happen next. Good plots set you anxiously guessing what will happen next.' In Shakespeare's tragedies this prevision by the spectator is often stimulated by ironic utterances of the characters themselves. King Lear foreshadows his own madness; Romeo foreshadows his own untimely doom. Similarly Henchard, in seeking to persuade Farfrae to enter his service, makes the fatalistic statement: 'In my business, 'tis true, strength and bustle build up a firm. But judgement and knowledge are what keep it established.'[2] Now by this time the reader has already inferred, from Henchard's past actions, that he is deficient in these two qualities—judgement and knowledge: hence a decline in his fortunes is expected, guessed at, anxiously awaited.

III

Having attempted to clear away some of the misunderstandings which hitherto may have prevented a just appreciation, we shall now consider in greater detail the character of the protagonist. Michael Henchard, like the great figures in Shakespearian tragedy, is built on the grand scale. He stands six foot one and a half in his socks, has a stentorian voice, and eyes that 'dig into men's souls'. He is a man in whom the primitive passions are strong. When he is agitated he moves 'like a great tree in a storm'. At first we see him as an egoist who is striving to realize all the forces within him; and with the callousness of egoism he is harsh towards those who hinder his progress. By dint of extraordinary energy and 'sledge-hammer directness' he achieves material success; but his composite nature is infectedwith the germs of decay. In a palaeolithic society

[1] Mr. Arnold Bennett. [2] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 57.

his positive qualities would have been sufficient to secure his ascendancy; but amid the sophistication and complexity of modern life, where Christian charity and sentiment, Machiavellian policy, and Nietschean injustice are inextricably woven into the fabric of conventional morality, his virtues are in many respects his fatal weaknesses. Lacking the education and knowledge necessary in a competitive world for the preservation of his gains, he lacks also the shrewdness and tact of the man who, while delegating to others the tasks which he himself cannot perform, cautiously conceals his deficiency, and always contrives to keep the reins of control in his own hands. 'In diplomacy he was as wrong-headed as a buffalo', and when challenged by Farfrae he scorns compromise and foolishly opposes 'his clumsy cudgel to the skilful dirk of a wiser man than himself'. His superstition, which steps in to complete the ruin begun by his headstrong methods, is again a survival from the palaeolithic age, which rendered him unfit for the more cunningly contested battles of an age of science. He has the egoist's reserve; but when a man takes his fancy, he 'takes it strong'. To such a one he is warm and confiding. Here again his virtue proved to be his fatal weakness; for in the deep and sincere affection which he lavished upon Farfrae (and which actually drew from the unresponsive young man a rather priggish reproach) we see the germ of Henchard's failure to maintain his ascendancy. He is sensitive about his personal honour—a primitive virtue which, when 'spoilt', merges into the modern vice of vanity. So with Henchard; for the fashionable snobbery of the modern bourgeoisie has smutched him, and he so far belies his real self as to bully his step-daughter for the simple freedom of her manners and for her innocent use of dialect words. Indeed, it is the juxtaposition of intensely human foibles and large heroic qualities which makes this character so convincingly 'round' and complete. He is a man of strong prejudices, hasty, passionate, sometimes even cruel through sheer lack of imagination: a man who is unable to strike the happy mean in thought, feeling, or action. Yet beneath all this fiery truculence, there is practical generosity, courage, and a real sense of justice. Moreover, his long suffering brings to light a fortitude, a deep humility, and a loving-kindness which deserved a better fate.

Mr. Duffin has said that Henchard, with all his faults, does not offend us. That is what comes of calling the story a 'record of disappointment'. Most appreciative readers will disagree with the critic. They will surely find that throughout the greater part of the tale their feelings will alternate between violent disgust and genuine sympathy; that about the middle sympathy will be at very

low ebb; and that towards the end it will rapidly increase and finally overwhelm every scruple. In all literature I doubt if there is to be found anything more moving than Henchard's last *cris de cœur*. One has been cited already.[1] Another is to be found at the end of Chapter XLI. After he has been saved from suicide, and Elizabeth-Jane has taken pity on him and promised to return to him, she overhears these words: 'Who is such a reprobate as I! And yet it seems that even I be in Somebody's hand!' Some time later, before he quits her for good, he tells her that he does not wish to stay and see her married to Farfrae, and adds: 'Don't let my sins, when you know them all, cause 'ee quite to forget that though I loved 'ee late I loved 'ee well.'[2] At the height of his anguish he is a stoic. An object of pity, he never pities himself. When he is rejected as a cheat by this woman whom he now loves better than life, there are, as the reader knows, extenuating circumstances; but when his lips are half parted to begin an explanation, he shuts them up like a vice. All the tragic significance of this man's failure to cope with life is concentrated in two words: 'He rose to his feet and stood like a *dark ruin*.'[3]

It was a fine inspiration which made the 'poor fond fool' Abel Whittle follow his former master to his lonely death. In Whittle's last simple account[4] of that grim surrender there is exquisite tenderness—a single touch of spontaneous human sympathy, a hint of redemption, which relieves, while it accentuates, the final agony. And it is the sublimity of this death-scene which, to my mind, utterly refutes the charge of pessimism so frequently brought against Hardy. For surely, when a writer can make us feel so intensely the poignant throes of a dying soul (and that is what Henchard desires—complete annihilation) he is *ipso facto* proving to us the great value he sets on the human soul; and only by a considerable elasticity of definition can such a valuation be called pessimistic. It is true that here, as in Shakespeare, there is no hint of survival in the paradisean or, indeed, any other sense. And Shakespeare has never been called a pessimist. Then why Hardy? Posterity will probably find it expedient to reserve the appellation for the creator of the Yahoos.

IV

Charles Lamb said that the tragedy of King Lear was too intense for stage representation, because as we read the play 'we *are* Lear'. That is exactly how many of us will feel about Henchard: we *are* Henchard. And with that surmise I am tempted to follow up a

[1] See p. 23 of this essay, note 1. [2] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 378.
[3] ibid., p. 395. [4] ibid., p. 403.

larger comparison, which I have always felt to be justified, between Lear and Henchard. To commence paradoxically with a difference, it is certainly true that, so far as human agents are concerned, Henchard is a man more sinning than sinned against: in his case, indeed, a more active and malign external Fate is to be reckoned with. But when that point is conceded, we find many striking resemblances both in character and destiny. Each story opens with an act of folly springing from one fundamental weakness, egoism. Lear casts off his favourite daughter because she refuses to pander to his vanity. Henchard casts off the responsibility of wife and child because they are a serious hindrance to his self-development. The natural passion in Lear is aggravated by senility; the natural passion in Henchard is aggravated by alcohol. Actually Henchard is *twice* guilty of casting off a woman to whom he was bound, and the closer parallel to Cordelia is, of course, the girl Elizabeth-Jane. There follows for both men a long story of retribution, of purgation through suffering. The decline of the old king begins at once, whereas the fall of the corn-factor begins soon after he has achieved a worldly prosperity which in Casterbridge roughly corresponds to the regal *ne plus ultra*. Both are divested of wealth and authority. Both are the victims of a too generous delegation of power to inferiors. Both feel a bitter regret for their lost position. Both are spurned from their own threshold by the upstart usurpers who have entered into possession. They are both so keenly affected by their misfortunes that their minds are unhinged. Lear becomes completely insane; Henchard, a much younger man, takes to drink and becomes decidedly crazed, as witness his fierce attack on Farfrae and his mad freak at the royal visit. Henchard, when all pride of office has gone, tries to recover his self-respect by forcibly demonstrating to his successful rival that he (Henchard) is still the better man in one sense—the physical. 'I could double him up like that', he says, laying a poker across his knee and bending it as if it were a twig, 'and yet I don't.'[1] Lear, moved by the same proud despair, boasts of his physical prowess in youth:

> I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
> I would have made them skip.

Even Lear's terrible execrations on his daughters find their counterpart in the novel, for Henchard, in the bitterness of hatred, forces the trembling choir, in 'The Three Mariners', to consign Farfrae to perdition with ritualistic thoroughness:[2]

> And the next age his hated name
> Shall utterly deface.

[1] Macmillan's Pocket Edition, p. 282. [2] ibid., p. 281.

Eventually both men are purged of their egoism, of their vanity, and of their harshness towards inferiors. Each becomes as a little child, living only for the sake of the daughter he has wronged. The ultimate ideal of each is fully expressed in those poignant words of the king:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.

Their dream is frustrated, and the catastrophe that overwhelms the one and the other seems to be the only consummation possible.

These resemblances between two great stories may not signify much; but they are interesting, since they provide another illustration of what has been called 'the tide of Time' in literature. It is certain that Hardy had been profoundly impressed by *King Lear*; and although any suggestion of borrowing or imitation would be impertinent, it is not unnatural to suppose that when two great writers have perceived similar aspects of universal truth their accents should sometimes coincide. I do not suggest that they are equal. For grandeur of conception, richness of incidental poetry, dramatic power, and vastness of cataclysmic issues, *King Lear* must stand as a greater work than *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But the latter, as a domestic drama woven out of the stuff of our everyday lives, is perhaps nearer to our sympathies. The tragedy of Michael Henchard is the supreme consummation of the tragedy of all those who

> . . . in Life's busy scenes immersed
> See better things and do the worst.[1]

[1] Matthew Green.

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KL-746-832